British
HUMANIST
Association

Religion in Schools

HUMANIST PROPOSALS FOR STATE-AIDED SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

What is the effect of the religious education given in the nation's schools today? Should there be big changes in the way in which it is given or in what the schools are expected to achieve? Should it be given at all in schools that are paid for by all taxpayers and rate-payers alike? Or is it a task that is more suitably tackled outside school hours chiefly in the home and by the church? Is education for right living possible if it does not form part of religious education?

This paper gives humanist answers to questions such as these.

'County and controlled schools'

The present position

1 A minority of the schools supported by rates and taxes give religious education based on the doctrines of a particular church or denomination. This paper begins with the other schools, the so-called 'county schools' and 'controlled schools'.* If fee-paying schools are ignored, nearly 85% of school children in this country are either in county or in controlled schools.† They come from homes in which there is every variety of religious belief, or lack of it. Some parents belong to Christian denominations, but some hold the Jewish faith and some are recent immigrants who have brought their own religious beliefs with them. Some have definitely rejected any form of supernatural or theistic belief and many more never go to church or chapel; whatever they may say when they are asked questions about their beliefs, they show their children by their lives that they do not take any religious belief seriously.

2 Schools full of children from this variety of home background must, under the Education Act of 1944, provide a course of religious instruction 'in accordance with an agreed syllabus' and must begin every school day with 'collective worship'. This is what is meant by the 'compulsory' religious requirements of the Act. (How it affects the individual boy or girl or teacher is discussed further on in paras. 6-14). Neither education nor worship must be distinctive of any particular church or denomination. This means in practice that instruction and worship must present undenominational Christianity. A separate 'agreed syllabus' is drawn up for each local authority area by a committee representing the various Christian denominations, the teachers, and the local authority. The 'agreed syllabus' is usually taken only as a general guide, not as giving a course of lessons to be followed precisely.

3 In primary schools it is still rare for religious instruction to be given by specialist teachers: it is far more commonly taken by each class teacher with his or her class. In many primary schools the old-established practice of a lesson a day for religious instruction is continued. In secondary schools, it is far more common to use specialist teachers, and the time given to religious instruction is often only one period a week, especially when the pressure of examinations comes to be felt.

* *These terms are defined on the back cover.*

† *In 1965, 77% attended County Schools, 7.6% Controlled Schools.*

What is the purpose of all this?

4 Teachers, especially teachers of older children, often say that their aim is to give their pupils an opportunity to choose what to believe. But if one looks at the history of the subject, and listens to those who are most keen to maintain present arrangements, it is plain that these arrangements are based on the hope that the schools will bring as many children as possible to accept the Christian faith and believe the Christian doctrines; especially those children whose parents can be thought of as lapsed Christians. The smaller the number of parents who go to church or chapel, the more important on this view becomes the task of the school, though the school is not expected to convert to Christianity children who are being brought up in some other faith. It is obvious that the schools are failing in this evangelistic task.

5 As humanists see it, this task ought not to be attempted by schools which are wholly supported by rates and taxes and which for most parents, whatever their belief or way of life, are the only schools to which they can send their children. To bring children to Christian belief is not the job of the county school: for those parents who desire it, it is the job of the home, and of the church or chapel or Sunday school chosen by the parents for the young child or by the older child for himself.

The harm that is done

6 Great harm is done by the schools' attempting this impossible and unsuitable task. They are more or less compelled to put Christian belief before their pupils as something which the authority of the school requires them to accept. With young children this may lead to a harmful conflict between the teaching put before them with the authority of the school and the denial of this implicit or explicit in their parents' way of life. If the pressure of authority is successful in early years, this is the worst possible preparation for individual choice and independent thinking later on. If it is unsuccessful, the result is as bad: the child may reject Christianity merely because of its association with authority, not because he is coming to see that a serious alternative way of life is possible.

7 The traditional approach, and especially the daily act of 'collective worship' at morning assembly, also encourages the impression that the school is a community of Christian believers, apart from Jews or immigrants. This is soon seen by children not to be true, and, as they come to realise this, it becomes all the more likely that the religious education given at school will be ineffective unless it is strongly supported by the home. There is a good deal of evidence to show that the majority of children, lacking that support, leave school having gained little real knowledge of the Christian religion. They are more likely to have acquired a confused idea that belief in the miraculous is respectable—which is not education for matter-of-fact thinking about the world of nature and history.* They may well have the impression that questions of right and wrong are tied up with religious beliefs that they have rejected or do not understand—a thoroughly bad preparation for intelligent reflection on the practical problems of living.

8 The argument in all this is that the influences of the law as its stands, and of tradition, impose an impossible task on county and controlled schools and prevent their doing something better to meet the children's needs. It is no answer to this to show that legally the individual teacher has the right to refuse to give religious instruction or to attend daily worship, and that the parent has the right to have his child excused from attending instruction or worship. These rights are important in themselves, and the way they are (or are not) exercised is an essential part of the present picture. But in nearly all cases, to be excused from worship or religious instruction does not mean being given an alternative. It means merely being given somewhere else to sit, sometimes not even that. The pupil is simply cut off from his fellows. Parents properly hesitate to ask for this, especially for young children, and the small amount of 'opting out' can certainly not be used as showing how few parents are unhappy with things as they are. Older pupils, especially in sixth forms, may be annoyed that it is their parents' wishes, not their own, that count. Many parents are in any case not aware of their right to have their children excused, and of those who are, many fear that their children would suffer from the disapproval of Heads and teachers. They and many senior pupils prefer to pretend beliefs they do not hold, until the last school testimonial has been written.

9 Our present practice is especially open to criticism in the primary school, where the children cannot help taking guidance in what to believe from the authority of their teacher and their school. In most primary schools religious instruction is given by the class teacher. Except in very small schools, it is possible

* *Some parents believe that baptism aids the health of a baby.*

to arrange for teachers to exchange classes, so that unwilling teachers need not give it; but requests for 'opting out' are often discouraged, because Heads find it difficult to make the necessary changes or because they think it important to keep up the pretence that all teachers are convinced Christians. Knowing what to expect, men and women of unorthodox views are likely to be deterred from taking up teaching in primary schools.

10 The Plowden Report (para. 562), although the majority did not recommend drastic changes, admitted serious questions. They asked whether an 'integrated curriculum' without a rigid timetable for subjects can 'include religious education when individual parents may not wish their children to receive it and certain teachers may not feel competent or wish to give it'. And the Report also asked: 'Is the very notion of an Agreed Syllabus compatible with the flexibility of the modern primary school?' In other words, a 'progressive' primary school following approved modern educational practices can hardly conform with the present law and may make it impossible for parents and teachers to exercise their right of opting out, since religion will not be a subject on the time-table but instead will permeate the school.

11 In secondary schools there is less difficulty. Older children are more ready to question what is put before them, and more secondary schools than primary schools try to shake off some of the consequences of the traditional approach. But many do not try very hard, and it is difficult for all. Teachers may try to discuss religious and moral questions in a way that leaves all options open; but the children know that the Christian religion holds an official position in the school, and they tend to feel that they are being 'got at' with veiled indoctrination, even if the teacher is trying to avoid this. How can one reconcile genuinely free discussion in the classroom with a daily assembly in which the school purports to be a worshipping Christian community?

12 Religious instruction in secondary schools is usually given by specialists or it is in any case usual for different subjects to be taught by different teachers. But non-believing teachers may find morning assembly a difficulty. Should they attend 'worship' of a deity in which they do not believe? Or should they absent themselves from the only corporate life of the school? The question of religion may also come up in a course of philosophy, or general studies, or history. Should they criticise the Christian religion, though this is part of the official life of the school as expressed in daily worship at morning assembly? If they have not taken the precaution of staying away from assembly, should they expose themselves to the charge of hypocrisy by revealing their unbelief in the classroom?

13 Over and above such particular difficulties, in secondary schools, and in primary schools as well, teachers who do not conceal their unbelief make it less likely that they will ever be appointed to a Headship, or to an appointment such as Head of a House in a large secondary school. The law forbids appointing bodies to take religious beliefs into account; but, however careful they may be to observe the law, the teacher who has let his unbelief be known is bound to feel that this diminishes his chances of appointment; or he may well feel that he would not wish to take on a Headship so long as the school has to face the world as though it were a Christian community.

14 For all these reason, there is in the county school—and even more in the controlled school because of the church's traditionally privileged position—a built-in tendency to conformity that does not encourage a wholly honest presentation either of belief or unbelief. This is not a criticism of Heads, or assistants, or parents, or appointing bodies. It is only saying that in the present state of society arrangements for 'opting out' and the 'conscience clause' for teachers cannot be made to work fairly or effectively.

Humanist proposals

15 As things stand, religious instruction on an agreed syllabus* does not mean merely teaching pupils about religion. It means putting the Christian religion before the children as having special claims on their loyalty and belief. This is true whether it is called education or instruction. Humanists propose that religious instruction or education in this sense should no longer form part of the county or controlled school curriculum, and that these schools should no longer pretend to be Christian communities. This does not mean that there need be silence in the school on the subject of religion, though humanists would expect that in most schools and for the greater part of school life there would be no period set aside for anything called religious instruction or education.

16 The schools would no longer be trying to do the job of the home or the church, but would find their own ways of teaching their pupils what they need to know about Christianity and also about other religions and ways of life. The place of Christianity in the history

** This means all the religious instruction given in county schools and the religious instruction given to most of the pupils most of the time in controlled schools.*

and present-day life of this country would be brought into history and literature and into social studies. Children would learn that Christianity is one of a number of world religions that have to be taken seriously, and that many people live serious lives on no religious basis at all. There is plenty of evidence to show that even quite young children can take interest in the fact that different groups of people hold different views on religious questions and practise different ways of life. There is no evidence that anyone gains from concealing such differences or from suggesting that any one view has unique claims.

17 If this is the pattern for the classroom, what about school assembly and 'worship'? Many county school children do not accept or understand the basic ideas expressed in Christian prayers or hymns, and while this is so they cannot be used effectively to express the feelings and aspirations of the school as a whole. It is indeed important that there should be opportunities for such expression, but humanists do not accept that it is only by using Christian ceremonies that children's feelings can be deeply and warmly stirred. Schools should be encouraged to develop their own ways of appealing directly to children's understanding and emotions without using specifically religious forms. This is particularly appropriate for special school occasions such as a school anniversary or a function for pupils leaving school, and also on occasions of wider significance such as World Children's Day or Human Rights Day. The occasions should be of a kind to engage the school wholeheartedly in an act which is prepared and enjoyed, never an imposed routine.

18 With the changing role of the county school, this is likely to lead to considerable diversity of practice and humanists would not have it otherwise. In this field it is all wrong to try to impose a rigid pattern on all schools by outside authority. But the practice of daily religious worship by the whole school should definitely be brought to an end, as no longer appropriate to the mixed communities that county schools are today, staff and pupils alike. Humanists find it astonishing that both the Newsom and Plowden reports bring out very clearly that schools are mixed communities, but still recommend that daily religious worship should be continued, in county as well as in denominational schools, as helping the school to realise 'its essential unity'. Humanists deny the value of an experience of 'essential unity' when it is based on false assumptions about shared beliefs.

Moral education

19 It is often argued that without religious instruction of the traditional kind there can be no effective moral education. Humanists take the exactly opposite view. They see plenty of evidence that moral education closely linked to religious belief is bound to be ineffective for most of the children who are in county and controlled schools today. It is obviously unwise to link moral education closely with a set of beliefs and sanctions that are themselves widely in question within society today: should the child come to discard these beliefs, as many do, the risk is that the moral values associated with them will also be rejected. Moral education needs to be considered in its own right. It is essentially grounded in formative experiences and relationships, but needs to be supplemented by a curriculum of subjects and activities that gradually extends and deepens understanding. Thus moral education in school is not itself a subject in the curriculum, but rather an aspect of the school. The school should set out methodically to provide the influences and experiences by means of which children learn the rudiments of self-respect, self-control, joy in co-operation, concern for others, a critical appreciation of quality, insight into those values upon which community life and personal fulfilment depend, an understanding of human problems, and a sense of responsibility for the future. To make moral education effective today we need changes in content and approach at least as far-reaching as those occurring in mathematics, science, and communication skills.

20 Since moral education is very largely a process of inter-personal and group influences, it is best developed in a community which has shared values, tasks, and ends. Experience of full participation in the life of the school is vital to the child's moral growth. This makes regrettable the segregation of any group of children (even the great majority) for religious reasons. The school's role is neither to sharpen nor suppress differences of view, but to provide an environment in which there is the bond of a shared educational enterprise. It is essential for effective moral education that the school community should not pretend to be brought together on the foundation of what is not held in common as though it were held in common. A school that makes this pretence is founded on a lie. A school should be founded on purposes and values and be governed by approvals and disapprovals which are common ground because they have been experienced in common and belong to the school as a community. In such a school there will naturally be frank recognition of and respect for differences in belief and outlook. Other considerations apart, this is a more formative moral experience than that of having one dominant but not universal body of beliefs imposed on the children and the school from outside.

Why not leave well alone?

21 When humanists try to stir up the issues raised in these paragraphs, the educational establishment tends to react rather wearily. "Surely you know that religious differences have in the past seriously delayed educational progress? For some time now there have been no religious disputes to disturb us. Very nearly everybody is happy with the general pattern of what the schools are trying to do. Do please keep quiet and let us get on with our job."

22 To this, humanists would reply. "We are not so sure as you are about what people think. The amount of 'opting out' from religious instruction and worship is no guide at all (see paras. 8-14). Public opinion polls, too, must be treated with some reserve. Unless parents have been helped to think about possible alternatives, a simple yes or no type question is not likely to get many answers that might be held to imply outright opposition to Christian belief and Christian morals. In any case, whatever people think, the shams and impossible tasks now imposed on the county schools prevent them from doing their proper educational job. (Many Christian teachers, though by no means all, would agree with this assessment.) You cannot get rid of this awkward fact simply by looking the other way. If you go on taking this line, your work for educational advance, to which you and we attach so much importance, will turn out to be largely wasted. That is why we cannot keep quiet, and must ask you to face the facts and to help set the county schools free to make a new start. The need is urgent.

23 "Whilst all this applies to county and controlled schools generally, we as humanists consider that the present system operates to specially bad effect in the primary school. The Plowden Report set out much useful and relevant material on religious and moral education, and we regret that the majority of the Advisory Council that drew it up did not proceed to make recommendations for far-reaching changes. As they saw it, the need for new thinking here is specially urgent."

Voluntary aided schools

How do denominational 'aided' schools fit into the public system of education?

24 If 84.6% of the children attending schools in the public system are in county or controlled schools, where are the rest? They are in 'aided' schools nearly all of which are denominational:

Church of England	5.6%
Roman Catholic	9.0%
Others, including Jewish	0.8%
Total	15.4%*

** These figures are for 1965. The comparable figures in 1955, ten years earlier, were:*

		Change
Church of England	7.9%	—2.3%
Roman Catholic	7.0%	+2.0%
Others, including Jewish	1.0%	—0.2%
Total	15.9%	—0.5%

25 Salaries of teachers and all other running expenses for these schools are paid out of rates and taxes in exactly the same way as the expenses of county and controlled schools, and the education given in them, except the religious education, is under the control of the local authority in exactly the same way as the education given in county and controlled schools. But the whole or part of the cost of putting up the buildings used by the denominational schools was met at some time or other from private money raised by the religious body concerned. Before 1944 they had to raise the whole; from 1944 to 1967 grants from the central government have been available at various rates up to 75% for schools that were replacing schools already in existence in 1944; and now under the 1967 Act grants up to 80% of the cost of building will be paid for any denominational school which is accepted as a necessary part of the public system. The religious education given in these schools is in effect the responsibility of the religious body to which the school is attached. They appoint two-thirds of the managers or governors and they have the main say in the appointment of teachers. It is the local authority's business to see that the teachers are properly qualified for other than religious education.

Aided schools chosen by parents on grounds of principle

26 The Roman Catholic and Jewish schools and many of the Church of England schools in towns are full of children sent to them by parents as a matter of principle: they want schools of this kind for their children, even if a county school is available. These schools can rely on their pupils' coming from homes with common religious beliefs. They do not have to face the difficulties of the county schools, with their children coming from a wide variety of home backgrounds, and they can have greater hope of success in putting across their own religious teaching.

27 Humanists argue that this is not the business of schools in the public sector. The State should not be involved either in sponsoring the non-denominational Christian teaching of the county schools or—still more—in financing and recognising the religious teaching of individual churches or religious bodies. This should be left to the home and the church, without either support or interference from the State. Humanists also regard it as actively harmful that children should be segregated into different religious groupings not merely for specific religious instruction, but for their school life at large: in preparation for an open society all alike would gain from sharing a common school experience. Under whatever auspices, exclusive experience of a closed school community is a wrong basis for education in what society has in common.

28 There is one argument often used by the supporters of denominational schools with which humanists are bound to sympathise. As things are, the only alternative open to them is the county school with non-denominational Christianity built in as its official religion for teaching and collective worship. The parent who takes his Anglican or Roman Catholic or Jewish beliefs seriously has as good reason as anyone else to think this unsatisfactory for his child. But if the county school were to cease to have an official religion, as suggested in paragraphs 15-20, if it were clearly recognised that religious teaching (as distinct from teaching about religion) does not belong to the county school and that moral education requires a school community which is genuinely united on common ground, then the whole picture changes.

29 Humanists hope that, when this happens, all parents would come to see that education for life in an open society is best provided in schools supported by all alike, not in schools organised separately for separate religious communities. That is why humanists have two closely linked aims:

(i) the basis of the religious and moral teaching given in county schools should be changed as suggested in paragraphs 15-20; and

(ii) the public system of education should then no longer include denominational schools.

Humanists do not, of course, wish to interfere in any way with the freedom of parents or churches or other bodies operating outside school hours or outside the public system of education.

Church of England aided schools in 'single school areas'

30 There are many Church of England schools in country villages or small country towns or in self-contained districts in larger towns to which the children have been sent not because their parents specially want them to go to a Church of England school, but because there is no choice. In many villages there is no other school, and even in towns where there is a county school in some sense within reach this may be full, or cut off by a busy road, and parents may in fact have to fall back unwillingly on a church school. It is not possible to say just how many there are of these 'single school area' church schools. The Department of Education and Science says that it is not possible to define them accurately and no official statistics are given. But they certainly form a substantial proportion of the total number of Church of England aided schools. (There is, of course, also a number of controlled schools in 'single school areas'.)

31 These schools do not rest at all on the principle of parental choice. They exist solely as a result of the special status accorded to the Church of England in former times, when the Church claimed special responsibilities for educating all children, not only the children of its own members. All that is quite out of date. These schools draw their children from the same variety of backgrounds as do county schools. Just as it is impossible for the county schools to become in any real sense Christian communities, so it is even more unreasonable for these 'single school area' church schools to claim to be Anglican communities.

32 It is no answer to say that the individual non-Anglican can opt out, whether as parent or teacher. The difficulties are even greater than those described in paragraphs 8-14 for county schools. There are very few cases in which it is fair to ask for a child to be excused from religious instruction or worship in a small village school, and the system places many teachers in an intolerable situation. Many women teachers, either married or with dependent relatives, can look for posts

only near their homes. If they live in the country, many or perhaps all the posts available will be in church schools that are too small to fit in a member of staff who cannot conscientously give Anglican religious instruction. What then is such a teacher to do? She may well have to choose between concealing her views, which must be profoundly unsatisfactory, or taking no teaching post at all, which is absurd when teachers are so badly needed.

33 Humanists see no reason why these denominational aided schools in single school areas should continue any longer. They do not help parents in any way to have a free choice of school, because they are the only schools available in the areas that they serve. Humanists will press political leaders to discuss with the Church authorities how best to bring to an end without delay the anomaly that they represent.

Controlled schools

34 In paragraphs 1-23 county schools and controlled schools are dealt with together because, from the point of view of curriculum, they raise largely the same problems†. But from other points of view the existence of controlled schools raises distinct issues. The category was invented in 1944 to meet special needs of the time, but humanists see no reason why the Church authorities, which have no continuing financial responsibilities for these schools, should continue to appoint a third of the school managers, and also control the appointment of 'reserved teachers' for giving denominational religious instruction. Many of these schools are in single school areas, and their status in all cases rests on historical accident, not on any expressed preference by parents living in the area served by the school. Humanists consider that the time has come for these schools to be converted into county schools.

Colleges of Education

35 The changes which we recommend in the work of the schools will clearly call for changes in the work of the Colleges of Education. The approach to moral education that we suggest will require the co-operation of all members of school staffs, and this will be reflected in the ways in which the Colleges set out to help all their students to prepare themselves for their responsibilities as teachers. It will become even more important that all Colleges shall treat their students as responsible adults. They should scrupulously avoid pressure on students to accept authority where this conflicts with their own beliefs or principles. They should, in fact, behave like Universities, as the better Colleges already do.

Summary

County and controlled schools †

36 * County and controlled schools should no longer include in their curriculum religious education in the sense of putting the Christian religion before their pupils with the backing of the school's authority (paras. 1-14).

* They should work out new ways of teaching their pupils what they need to know about the Christian religion and other religions and ways of life (paras. 15-18).

* They should work out methods of moral education not related to religious beliefs, using all aspects of school life as well as the opportunities that the classrooms can give (paras. 19-20).

* To allow these changes will require amendment of the Education Act of 1944.

37 Without waiting for the law to be changed, humanists will encourage the widest possible discussion by parents, teachers, and others concerned to work out how best the schools can improve their methods in the direction suggested in this paper. They regard it as specially important to find out how much common ground exists for supporting a programme of moral education of the kind outlined in paragraphs 19-20.

38 If it becomes clear that there is to be serious delay in carrying out the general changes that they advocate, humanists will wish to explore the possibility of providing an alternative course in county and controlled schools which could be chosen by parents who do not wish their children to receive Christian religious education. This is only a 'second best', and they would very much prefer not to create divisions of this kind in the schools, but that schools should develop methods and courses acceptable to all.

† *See the explanation of the terms 'county' and 'controlled' on the back cover.*

Aided schools

39 * Aided schools giving religious and moral education in accordance with the doctrines of a particular church or religious body should no longer continue as part of the system of schools maintained by rates and taxes. They should be taken over as county schools or left to the church to finance without State aid (paras. 26-29).

* Aided schools in 'single school areas' should be converted without delay into county schools. Their continued existence is wholly unjustifiable (paras. 30-33).

Controlled Schools

40 * Voluntary controlled schools, although treated in this paper along with county schools, differ in allowing the churches special powers and privileges. They should be converted into county schools (para 34).

Colleges of Education

41 * Colleges of Education should respect the beliefs and convictions of their students, and make no more demands in this respect than Universities do (para. 35).

On all the points touched on in this paper humanists recognise and accept that they have to build up support by parents, teachers, and the general public for the changes which have been suggested in the responsibilities and curriculum of schools. They believe that these changes can be shown to be of fundamental importance to sound public education in this country.

Glossary of terms

'County' schools are fully controlled by the Local Education Authority, and are required to have religious instruction in accordance with an 'agreed syllabus' not distinctive of any religious denomination for one period each week. All Managers or Governors are appointed by the LEA, and the LEA has complete financial responsibility.

'Controlled' schools use the 'agreed syllabus' except when parents request denominational teaching, which may then be given for up to two periods a week. One-third of the Managers or Governors are appointed by the founding body with which the school is associated (usually the Church of England). The Local Education Authority has full financial responsibility. (see para. 34)

An 'agreed syllabus', the basis of RI in county schools, is determined in the way described in para. 2, and is non-denominational in character.

'Aided' schools are voluntary schools in which the religious instruction is controlled by the Managers in accordance with the Trust Deed of the particular school (that is, the teaching is denominational). Two-thirds of the Managers or Governors are appointed by the foundation or church. The Local Education Authority is responsible for 80% of building costs and all running costs. (see para. 25)

'Denominational' schools are voluntary aided schools whose founding body requires religious instruction to be given in the tenets of a particular denomination.

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